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E. VEDDER, PINX.

W. J. LINTON, SC.

SLEEPING GIRL.



THE DANCE. — BY ELIHU VEDDER — FROM A PHOTOGRAPH.

## ELIHU VEDDER.

### SECOND AND CONCLUDING ARTICLE.



THE MODEL OF THE MARSYAS.

REDUCED FAC-SIMILE OF A DRAWING BY E. VEDDER.

THE latest in Vedder's classic series are *The Young Marsyas* and *The Cumæan Sibyl*. They are to be named as of prominence, both by reason of their size and ambitious intention. The Parisian journal *L'Art*, at the time of their display at the Exposition of 1878, spoke of them, it will be remembered, as *ces deux mechantes toiles*, and covered them with a sweeping condemnation, which was far from just, even if it be admitted that they are not the artist's most successful works. The color in both, in pursuit of tone, has become a more or less monotonous russet. Nor can it be said,

in the case of the *Marsyas* at least, that the usual interest in the story is aroused. The young satyr is playing pan-pipes, crouched at the foot of a large tree-trunk, in an Arcadia which varies from the ordinary kind in being covered with snow. A circle of hares sitting about in a listening attitude are painted with a capital realism, and there is very nice feeling in the far-retreating prospect, the bare branches spreading across the sky, and the bluish shadows and artful gleams of light scattered on the snow.<sup>1</sup> But we are inclined to shiver a little with the unclad Marsyas, and, if we believe in him, do not gather at any rate any intimation of his tragic position as the foolhardy rival of a god, and type of reckless presumption for all future generations. This treatment, by the way, of classic myths is quite characteristic of the artist. He cares little for the accepted form of the story, but, simply taking it as a starting-point, as a stimulant for his fancy, he transforms it and works it out, regardless of precedent. We have met with a similar instance before in the *Head of the Young Medusa*, and a still better example

<sup>1</sup> Those who saw this painting only in the artist's temporary studio in New York did not see it under the most favorable conditions. It gained astonishingly in the better light of Messrs. Williams and Everett's gallery, where it was shown in Boston, and surprised those who had seen it before by the brilliancy of its light in the middle ground and distance. — EDITOR.

is furnished by the *Phorcydes*. These three daughters of Phorcys and Ceto personified the horrors of the sea, and, according to the ancient myth, were born old and ugly, with but one eye and one tooth for interchangeable use between them. In this form Goethe has introduced them in the *Classical Walpurgis Night*, in the second part of *Faust*,—so ugly that even Mephistopheles, whom they claim to resemble, is shocked at his own ugliness. But Mephistopheles flatters them, and wonders why sculptors should not prefer to chisel their shapes instead of Juno, Pallas, Venus, and “such like.” Has Vedder taken a hint from Mephistopheles? In his rendering, the three old hags—the direct embodiments of fear, horror, and terror, as their names indicate—have become stately maidens, whose gestures and faces are expressive of the agony of mind that the foreboding of disaster brings with it. They look out into the future, and see the terrible fate that is coming, but the disaster itself and the exultation over it are avoided, and thus, by the softening down of the original version, the story is made somewhat more conformable to the canons of art.

The *Sibyl* has a greater intrinsic interest. Rising to the importance of the occasion, which involves the welfare, the continued existence, perhaps, of heroic Rome, we may sympathize with the ancient crone, hurrying away with mutterings of wrath from her repulse by the purblind Tarquin, even as the smoke of the fire in which she has burned the rejected books, and the foliage of the trees, all bent forward by the wind and going with her, seem to sympathize. She is alone in the centre of a prospect, with a range of mountains like the Abruzzi in the distance. By no means the most seems to have been made of the opportunity, and we should be moved more if the wizardess, heroic myth as she is, had had more of the traits of a veritable human being. Her garments swing, rather than blow before her, and give too much of an impression of solidity. She is like a figure modelled in clay, which perhaps she was at first,—a method which, instead of inspiration from existing statuary, may aid in accounting for the general sculpturesque effect before adverted to. It is a practice which has the weight of old masters, like Tintoret and Correggio, behind it, and is much affected by moderns, like Richmond among the English, who find in it accidental felicities of lighting that could never have been invented; but its use rarely fails to be betrayed by some open artificiality.

A more hearty commendation as a whole is to be bestowed upon another antiquarian period, the merry and graceful Cinque-Cento, the second of Italy's historic greatness. This took its turn in favor. In the subjects chosen from this period Vedder shows a trait of mind which is curiously at variance with that betrayed in so many of the pictures hitherto spoken of. He is gay and light, and full of enjoyment of life, and the sombre melancholy, the brooding over the mysteries of existence, which cast a gloom over all his previous creations, seem to have left him. The mandolin succeeds the pan-pipes, and pages in piebald silken liveries that fit them like their skins, and high-born sportive dames and damsels, to portentous classic wizards and semi-deities. A fair *improvisatrice* strikes the strings and uplifts a speaking countenance. The joyous festival of a wedding procession moves by. A little assembly of Venetians reclines in a pleasant glade on the main-land, and diverts itself no doubt with such ingenious tales as those Boccaccio has left us a record of as the resource of the Florentines on the heights of Fiesole, above their plague-stricken city. Again, a long, frieze-like arrangement of figures in every variety of animated pose represents the *Dance*. (See the heading, page 369.)

The *Venetians on the Main* have behind them a half-screen of olive-trees, which opens near the centre, showing a charming bit of distant country, with blue hills and sky. A cavalier standing with a lady turns over the leaves of a manuscript. Another is seated meditatively on a slab. A third, to the left of a dame with Titianesque broad back and blonde hair in a coil,—a bushy-headed, scarlet-capped, dark, handsome youth,—lies extended at length by a lady in white, and falls with her into such charming lines of composition that the two would make a very lovely and sufficient picture in themselves.

In the *Dance* some of the participants bow with a profound and courtly grace; others balance,

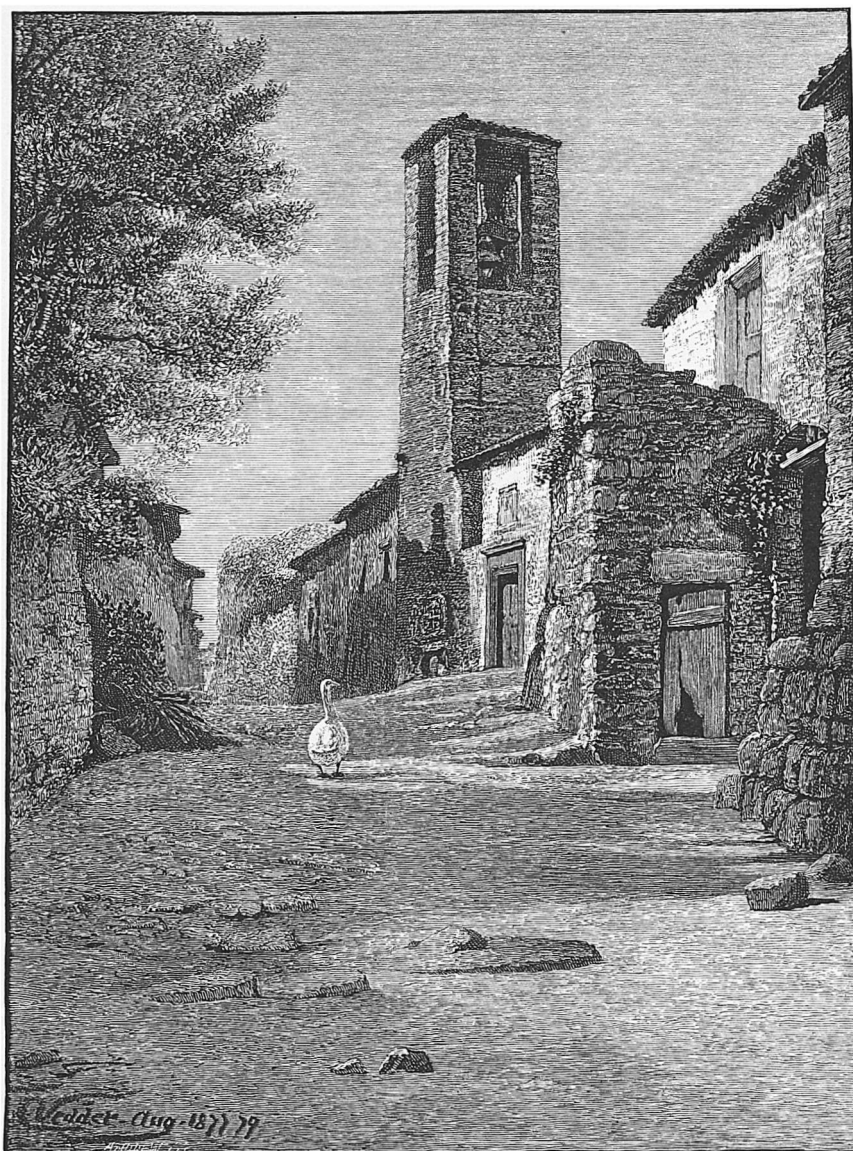


bending backwards with a touch of hauteur; others shake tambourines held aloft in the air. Some are seated on tapestry-covered settles, the straight, severe lines of which make a piquant contrast to the prevailing easy curves. Musicians of a grotesque and vulgar mien contrast the patrician types of the dancers. A beautiful youth, thrumming a guitar, from which a ribbon lightly floats, passes among the several groups, — sixteen figures in all, composed in threes and fours, — uniting them into a whole. The picture is distinctly managed for a semi-decorative effect, by having the figures no more than two deep and the shrubbery brought up close behind them, thus securing the shallowness in the plane of action desirable for this result. The play of light and shade on faces and forms is gentler and more agreeable than usual with this artist. The scheme of color is made to aid the unity of effect.

The same note—vivid scarlet—is struck near the centre and at both extremities, and through the intervals are distributed judicious derivative tints from it. The color, too, is harmonious and glowing. This is perhaps the most genial, gay, and sunshiny picture, of any considerable importance, which Vedder has painted. The series, as a whole, holds its own excellently with the work of foreign masters of a similar character.

Pursuing our classification, we come to a Scriptural group. Its best examples are a *Death of Abel*, and a weird, small *Crucifixion*, in which only the foot of the cross, with the Marys clustered about it, is seen, against a lurid sky. Abel, a graceful boy, is stretched below his altar fire. The spot where he lies is in shadow, while all the country round about, wherever the murderer may have turned for refuge, is bright with a searching light. An allegorical *Star of Bethlehem*, in which the Eastern kings are seen approaching on their camels below, while a conclave of shadowy angels and prophets of old appear on a massive cloud above, vies with these in ambition, but is of an unpleasant harshness in parts.

Then there is a department of pure, formal landscape composition. The artist shows a command of the means by which size, sense of distance, and symmetrical proportion are conveyed. He combines, in the principal effort, entitled *Central Italy*, the elements of a stretch of eighty



THE PRIDE OF THE CORSO.

ENGRAVED BY JOHN ANDREW AND SON.

miles of country, with great probability. From a waste and stubbly foreground opens out a great plain spotted with vegetation and straight-walled farm enclosures. On the foot-hills is a hamlet, with its mediæval castle, and seamed and riven mountains rise beyond. It is not unnatural, but it is a brown, old-masterish, conventional nature, after all. It belongs to the "great" landscape school of the past, and in these later times, when the charm of simplicity in landscape is so much more to the general liking, and quality rather than quantity is esteemed a desirable trait, we cannot help recalling that the "great" landscapes flourished when there was not much respect for Nature as she is, and even not a little open contempt for her, as shown in the "formal" style of landscape gardening, invented among other things at that time.

He is much more pleasing in his more spontaneous efforts, his views of real nature. These are idyllic bits which show the character of his real inclination, untrammelled by a desire for excessive meaning. Here is a little peasant-girl, in pale blue, spinning in an olive orchard of grayish green; here is a child, crept into a crevice between the heavy stone olive-crushers; here a peasant and laden donkey under a steep slope, at the top of which a straw stack comes dark against the sky; here, again, a solitary goose, *The Pride of the Corso*, enlivening a lonely Italian village street. He loves architecture, too, and gives with warm appreciation an old belfry at Orte, or a ruddy old Lombard church, with its broken stucco and party-colored stripes of stone and brick, behind its bastion, at Velletri. Perugia, his residence for a considerable time, has furnished the scene of very many of these; and he has noted well Lake Trasimene, which lies below it,—its rushes, and fishermen's skiffs, the floating earthen eel-pots in its margin, all dark against a silvery surface at twilight, when the last after-glow of sunset is still in the sky.

Let us note, in fine, a miscellany of alchemists, old saints, burial of the dead outside a plague-stricken town, which might be gathered into a Gothic group,—sympathetic farm scenes somewhat in the manner of Millet, genre heads, still life, and decorative panels,—and we have passed over a range of activity of remarkable extent, and almost unique for an American artist. To have attempted so great a scope has not been, perhaps, for the development of the painter in the direction of his greatest force, nor the part of the best worldly wisdom, but it is to be involuntarily admired. It corresponds to what one understands of the true artistic temperament,—a disposition impressible on many sides, and by no means content, in a world so full of actually existing and historic themes, with a single petty division of labor. Respect for the prudence of the painter who can forever circumscribe himself within the limits of a single tree and pasture, a single spot of light in a wood, the same old woman always knitting at her fire-side, the same Venetian fishing-boat with idly drooping sails, is apt to mingle unduly, and to its detriment, with that which may be entertained for his talent itself. Vedder, at least, can never be made subject to this kind of derogation.

No consistent progress in technical development can be traced in his works. Nor is one's attention drawn to marked changes in manner until, perhaps, we arrive at the excellent *Sleeping Girl*, one of the very latest products of his easel. In this there is an appearance of attention to newer and broader methods than he had been hitherto in quest of. It is of a pleasant grayness of tone, an easy modulation and absence of extreme striving for relief, that put it in a category somewhat by itself, and possibly mark the beginning of a new departure. This, with *The Venetian Model*, heretofore admiringly mentioned, from the point of view of technical management, may be regarded as the best in the entire list. Apart from these, such as he began, in execution he has continued, evidently preferring painstaking finish to boldness of handling. He does not "load"; he bestows his pigment sparingly and with little crispness; he prefers tone to values. His skies are not often luminous, and are more apt to be frigid than softly pensive. He shows little comprehension in his numerous draped figures, which offer such excellent opportunities for it, of the delicious use which may be made of white,—a leading test of the real colorist.

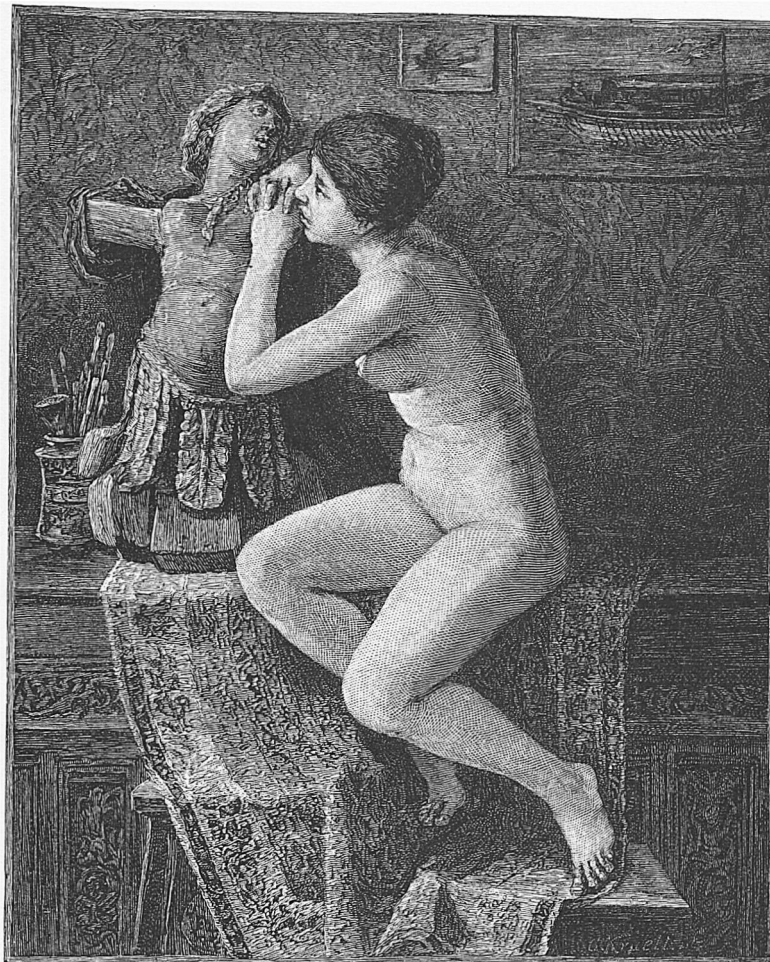
There are better *painters*, merely as such, among those who have issued lately from the advantageous training of the great foreign schools. Beside some of the rich and dashing work of the newest mode, his doings may often have an unpretending, even a somewhat tame air. But now, having taken him to pieces, let us put him together again. How few there are of all these, so well endowed with skill for carrying their purposes into effect, who have anything like a parallel invention, who rise indeed above the merest common-place! Mere unimaginative prettiness on the one hand is sought to be relieved by "character studies" on the other, — representations of the rough figures from every-day life who are brought into the studios and carefully realized. The novel excursions of Vedder into the realm of the imagination, his seriousness of aim, his bias towards the unreal, the exalted, the historically remote, seem, in these circumstances, of an extreme distinction.

Hamilton's entirely frivolous Parisian lorette, *Cérise*, one of the very best pieces of painting in the Paris Exposition of 1878, hung opposite the gloomy *Cumæan Sibyl*. But even if the latter were the *méchante toile* which *L'Art* made it out to be, it would still seem of a monumental grandeur in comparison. One would almost say that a failure in the one was better than success in the other.

It is not especially desirable, nevertheless, that the ideas of Vedder should be commended to general imitation. Added to the fact that a little weirdness goes a long way in an unimaginative world, this kind of conceits should be the spontaneous expression of a peculiar bent. With any less genuine stimulus they fall into parody, and are both ridiculous in themselves and prejudicial to the patterns which in the original gave us real pleasure. If idealists do not abound, it is the misfortune of the time, but there seems no very promising way of forcing their appearance.

However much we may regret it, it is probable that we shall have to rest content for a considerable time with seeing a very few attain to such exceptional positions as Vedder took from the first among American artists, — a very few poets and visionaries in a work-a-day world, a very few pensive idealists in a generation of cheerfully matter-of-fact realists.

W. H. BISHOP.



THE VENETIAN MODEL.

ENGRAVED BY G. KRUELL.